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Viewing cable 07DAMASCUS389, codel pelosi meets syria's president asad

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
07DAMASCUS389	2007-04-25 09:17	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Damascus

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Tags: prel, pgov, sy

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b/d

11. (C) Summary: House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and 13 members of her delegation met April 4 in Damascus with Syrian President Bashar Al-Asad. They discussed the conflict in Iraq, Lebanon, possibilities for a renewed Middle East Peace Process, Iran, and, during the meeting and a follow-on lunch in the Old City, the lack of free expression in Syria and the plight of Syrian political prisoners. End Summary.

12. (C) Visiting House Speaker Pelosi and members of her delegation met for 50 minutes April 4 at the Presidential Palace with Syrian President Asad. Aside from Pelosi, those attending the meeting were the following: the Speaker's spouse, Paul Pelosi; Congressman Henry Waxman (D-CA); Congressman Nick Rahall (D-WV); Congressman Tom Lantos (D-CA); Congressman David Hobson (R-OH); Congresswomen Louise Slaughter (D-NY); Congressman Keith Ellison (D-MN); House Sergeant at Arms Wilson Livingood; Mike Sheehy, the Speaker's Assistant for National Security; Nadeam Elshami, the Speaker's public affairs assistant; Robert King, from Congressman Lantos' office; Kenny Kraft, from Congressman Hobson's office; and Air Force escort COL Lori Robinson. Also attending was the Charge and an Embassy notetaker at the Codel's request. Attending on the Syrian side was FM Walid Mu'allim; MFA head of foreign media Bushra Kanafani; and the Syrian Ambassador to the U.S. Imad Mustapha. Following the meeting Asad and First Lady Asma Al-Asad hosted a one hour lunch at a hotel in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City for the Pelosi delegation, attended by the Syrian FM, the Syrian Ambassador to the U.S., and Syrian Expatriates Minister Buthayna Sha'ban.

13. (C) OPENING REMARKS: In the meeting, the President welcomed the delegation and stressed his desire for a Syrian-U.S. dialogue on issues of common interest. "Syria wants a long-term dialogue, not 1,2,3,4," he said. "We are ready for dialogue about the big picture, not the details of the painting. We need to start those discussions today." The Speaker responded that the main goal for the delegation's visit was combating terrorism, adding, "The pillars of our foreign policy are to promote democracy and freedom, stop the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and lead the Global War on Terrorism." She stressed that the U.S. wants to use the power of its ideals to convince Syria to cooperate on issues, noting the following:

-- On Iraq: The U.S. does not want foreign fighters killing Iraqis and Coalition soldiers in Iraq. "We would appreciate it if you could tell us how we can work together to stop this."

-- On prospects for a renewed peace process: In Israel, the PM said that he was "pleased that our delegation" was coming to Syria and that he wanted the Speaker to convey to the Syrian President the PM's desire for peace talks.

-- On Syrian support for terrorist groups: In Lebanon, Hizbollah is using force to get its way. Palestinian Hamas does the same. "I have heard that you could have a meeting of terrorist leaders in Damascus without anyone flying in."

-- On Israeli prisoners: The U.S. is concerned about the two Israeli prisoners being held by Hizbollah and the one being held by Palestinians.

-- On the lack of freedom of expression in Syria: "We have heard from people in this country who want to express themselves freely." (Note: The Speaker met for 10 minutes on April 3 with a Syrian opposition leader, Riad Seif, during a reception at the Ambassador's residence. End Note.)

She closed by saying, "Let's begin to go down this path of

peace together. You have options. We have options. We hope we can further peace together."

14. (C) SYRIAN PRESIDENT'S RESPONSE: Asad responded by reiterating a desire for dialogue. He noted Syria's 80-year history of bad relations with Turkey, then pointed to the upturn in the Turkish-Syrian relationship, as seen by the April 3 visit of Turkish PM Erdogan to Syria. With the U.S., Syria is looking for strategic--not tactical--cooperation, on the issues of common interest where both sides were 60 to 70 percent in agreement, he said. The Syrian President noted the following:

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-- On Iraq: Syria has no interest in a border that permits the entry of drugs and terrorists. "There are sleeper cells in Syria. And we are acting against terrorists everyday, but we don't acknowledge it to prevent a fall in public morale and a threat to tourism and foreign investment." The President urged a timetable for the withdrawal of Coalition forces from Iraq and the strengthening of the Iraqi political process. He reiterated that when the U.S. forces left Iraq was not the key. The key was the political process in Iraq. "The biggest problem in Iraq is the Constitution. We have started in Syria to discuss this; when we have a clearer vision of common goals, we can all sit together and have a new Constitution." Syria was not interested in helping the U.S. Administration, but it would work with Iraqis and "help America that way."

-- On Lebanon/Hizbollah and Hamas: Syria has interests in Lebanon as "it spent a lot of money there." Lebanese sectarianism required a National Unity Government that could reach consensus on all issues. The solution for Lebanese political problems is constitutional, which "we have been working on lately with Hizbollah." Syria's main goal was to prevent "foreigners intervening in Lebanon," he said, particularly the way French President Chirac was intervening. He said he had raised Lebanon with with Turkish PM Erdogan, when Erdogan visited Syria the previous day.

-- On the peace process: Asad said he had always talked positively about prospects for a renewed peace process, but Israel had failed to respond positively. For the first time in history, the U.S. Administration has failed to push Israel toward the Arabs, saying that such a move would make the Syrian President stronger. "This is not true. Israeli PM Olmert has a 3-percent support rating in Israel, while the Syrian President had the full support of his people." The Syrian President had talked to Erdogan about making contacts with the Israelis to further show his seriousness about peace.

-- On Israeli prisoners: Egypt was taking the lead on mediating with the Palestinians for the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, and Syrians did not want to interfere, "although some people falsely say that Syria was putting obstacles in front of his release." On the two soldiers held by Hizbollah, Syria was waiting for the designation of an international mediator, like the role Germany had sought to play. (Note: Here the Syrian FM intervened and noted that in his previous appointment with the Speaker, he had suggested she appoint a Israeli-authorized member of the U.S. Congress to mediate between Israel and Hizbollah. The Speaker called the proposal an "official overture" that she would raise to the U.S. President and Israeli officials. End Note.) Asad asserted there were 19 Syrian prisoners in Israel; the twentieth prisoner had died of leukemia in 2006 after the Israelis failed to treat him.

15. (C) Congressman Waxman pursued the issue of the Israeli prisoners, pushing for Syrian humanitarian cooperation in returning the remains of executed Israeli spy Eli Cohen, Israeli soldier Guy Hever who disappeared on the Golan in the late 1990s, and Israeli Ron Arad missing since the 1980s. The Syrian President responded that Arad had gone missing in

Lebanon, that there was no information about Hever, and that, having been a spy, Cohen's case was a national issue he could not simply act on without preparing the way. "The Syrian people would not accept this." All the Israeli cases could be discussed during peace negotiations. Waxman noted that a Syrian humanitarian gesture on Israeli prisoners would be a positive signal to the Israelis of the Syrian regime's peaceful intentions. "The Israeli PM is not sure of your sincerity," Waxman said to the Syrian President. Asad responded that now was not the time for gestures but for action. Asad said Syria proved its desire for peace with the negotiations in the 1990s. Peace was in Syria's interest, said Asad, noting: "I have a lot of poor people. Middle East peace would make them richer. It would also undermine extremism. It is logical that I am for peace."

16. (C) Congressman Hobson further pursued the need for Syrian actions on the Israeli prisoners. PM Olmert is weak, Hobson said, but a peace deal would make him stronger. He added to Asad, "If you could talk to Hamas (about the Israeli prisoner) and say 'Let's get a deal.' Then Egypt could be successful." Asad responded that the peace process was like marriage and that Syria as the suitor had the impression that

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Israel was not interested in a match. "Olmert has never publicly said he is ready for dialogue," Asad said. Hobson retorted that sometimes the suitor must be persistent. Asad responded, "That's humiliating." The Speaker asked whether her delegation could say publicly that Syria was ready for peace. Asad responded, "When Olmert says he is ready publicly, I will tell my people in my next public statement that we are also ready."

17. (C) SYRIA WITH IRAN OR THE WEST?: Congressman Lantos noted his previous meetings in Damascus with the late Syrian President Hafez al-Asad and with Bashar al-Asad. He questioned the Syrian President's ties to Iran, asking, "Do you want to be viewed as a partner of Iranian President Ahmadinejad? I can't see you denying that the Holocaust ever occurred. I can't see you saying that you want to wipe Israel off the map with nuclear weapons." Syria now has an opportunity to develop a relationship with the U.S., said Lantos, who then asked the Syrian President about his vision for U.S.-Syrian relations over the next five to ten years.

18. (C) Asad responded that the SARG had the will to engage with the U.S., but "did not have the means and the tools." If the U.S. was open-minded about its partnership with Syria, each country could go its different way and meet at the end, Asad said. "Or you can say to us, 'If you don't go our way, then you are against us.'" Asad said that his goals for renewed U.S.-Syrian ties spanned one to two generations and focused on the need for the U.S. to serve as a broker for Middle East Peace, as well as increasing development including information technology in Syria.

19. (C) LEBANON: Congressman Rahall noted his Lebanese origin and stressed the need for improved Syrian-Lebanese relations, including embassies between the two countries. He asked Asad for a readout on his recent meetings with Saudi King concerning Lebanon and the peace process. Asad responded by first noting strong Syrian-Lebanese ties--not through any Syrian intelligence presence in Lebanon but rather through "Lebanese friends who come to Syria every day." The Syrian President responded to the second point by saying that his Lebanon-related discussions with the Saudi King were limited to the King's comments that if there were a Sunni-Shiite conflict there it would destroy the whole region. Asad commented that many official foreign visitors to Syria alternately ask Syria to stay out of Lebanon and then ask for Syrian help. "We can help if Lebanon wants. To close the border and isolate the country would be dangerous," he said. Asad returned to an earlier theme, noting that the solution to Lebanon's problems were constitutional and required Lebanese consensus. He said Syria was seeking to

build its influence on Lebanon by improving its relations first with Saudi Arabia and then with post-Chirac France.

¶10. (C) POLITICAL PRISONERS: At the lunch, the Speaker, who was seated next to the President raised the issue of Syrian political prisoners Kamal Labwani, Anwar al-Bunni, Michel Kilo, Mahmoud Issa and Aref Dalila. The Speaker, who had briefly met with Mrs. Labwani at a pull aside on the margins of an April 3 reception hosted by the Embassy, noted that Labwani had recently been placed in solitary confinement in difficult conditions. The President responded that he would look into Labwani's case. He added that Bunni, Kilo and Issa cases were out of his hands and with the court.

11.(C) Also at the lunch Representative Ellison pressed Asad on Iraq and Iran's negative role in the region. Representative Slaughter raised Lebanon and Representative Lantos explained his international "Nuclear Fuel Bank" legislation asking Asad to press Iran to accept this alternative if Iran was truly seeking peaceful nuclear power. Asad said he would be interested to see the legislation and "would raise it" with the Iranian President. FM Muallim, noting that Lantos had said that any country could be included, asked rhetorically whether the "U.S. would give uranium to Syria if it was not even willing to give spare parts for civilian aircraft to Syria."

12.(U) The delegation conducted a press conference at the airport prior to departure.

13.(U) This cable was cleared by CODEL Pelosi after the CODEL's departure from Syria.
Corbin